



WESTERN NEWS

SEPT 4, 02

'Asbestosis' bumper sticker called hurtful and tacky

To the Editor:

For many years, bumper stickers have been a method of a person's right to express their opinion. Bumper stickers have been a way of life and generally, interesting reading for the person in the car following behind. We were able to ascertain a person's political belief, a person's religious views, views on Constitutional rights and sometimes, simply humorous statements.

I have read messages that I agree with and messages that are so idiotic in context, one wonders how the driver of the vehicle managed to place the sticker right side up, still it is our right to display our opinions on our property.

There is one message that is being displayed which is so hurtful, I feel that I need to respond. That message is displayed directly below the political elephant, the sticker depicting, "I Love Libby" and it reads, "...And no I do not have asbestosis" with the name of the owner displayed below.

I had heard that such a message was being displayed, but until I viewed it with my own

eyes, I did not feel qualified to state my opinion.

During the Eureka Fair, I spoke with many people. One person was a man, my husband's age who thanked me for my efforts for the last three years in bringing the asbestos situation to light and not letting up. Then he told me that he was dying of lung cancer. He had just completed his second round of treatment and had been informed by his doctor that there was nothing more that they could do to prolong his life.

This man was not angry, he accepted the situation, and he was grateful that at least the Grace medical plan was in place to take care of his medical needs. All I could do was to say that I was sorry, wish him well and tell him to contact me if he needed help.

Shortly after leaving this man, I happened to notice a vehicle pulled in next to the Republican booth. The message mentioned above was prominently displayed for anyone passing by. Inside the booth were the Republican volunteers and candidates, chatting, joking

and in general, enjoying the fair, just as I had been. I saw red that day and have continued to see red since. I am ashamed that our community leaders appeared to be a part of this.

This is by far the tackiest ploy yet. To say that the sticker is to keep people from asking questions outside of our community is idiotic. If asked, isn't it simpler to state, "No, I am one of the fortunate ones who hasn't been affected by the disease?" Wouldn't it be easier to educate outsiders to the fact that Libby is a beautiful community and that it is safe to come to Libby, as we have done?

Our community has presented itself to the press as uncaring, selfish, greedy and possibly every other derogatory term one can imagine since the story first broke in November 1999. We, the ones diagnosed with asbestos-related disease, have not complained. We have continued to move forward with our lives striving to clean up the community and make it safe for future generations. We have invested time from our lives to make our community safe. We have had to accept a less than adequate medical program, we have buried our friends, and felt compassion for

those newly diagnosed. We have had to face our own mortality and accept it. We have earned respect in the highest offices in Washington, D.C., because of our efforts for not only ourselves, but for our community.

We are more than just a "bunch of miners and their families" anymore. We are your neighbors, we are your business owners, we are your store clerks, we are the people who deliver your mail, plow your streets. We are your elected officials past and present. We have one common factor, we lived in Libby at the wrong time and now we are suffering the consequences. We are able to move forward and get on with our lives, why can't you?

Simply removing the sticker at this point will not take away the hurt and hate. To the persons displaying the sticker, to the political party that seemingly endorsed the phrase for the thousands of people at the fair to view, to the local printing company who accepted payment for printing the sticker, I say, "You owe your community a public apology." As I said at the onset in the spring of 2000, "Even Republicans inhaled."

Gayla Benefield